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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-4601

July 29, 2013

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The Honorable Eric K. Shinseki
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Shinseki:

I write today to request that the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) explore ways to formally partner with *pro bono* law school veterans clinics nationwide to leverage the incredible efforts of these higher education institutions, on behalf of our nation's veterans, to reduce the VA claims process strain. I appreciate you making the backlog of claims a top priority, and I believe partnering with these law school clinics would be an excellent way to help accomplish this goal.

In a joint hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and the House Armed Services Committee on July 10th, 2013 Deputy Undersecretary for Benefits, Mr. Danny Pummill, stated that he was willing to incorporate *pro bono* law schools efforts inside the benefit claims process. As you know, our nation's veterans face a claims backlog that delays benefits and care while the stressed claims system spends extraordinary effort to acquire supporting documentation for claims. The current practice often manifests itself in an even longer appeals process. A partnership that allows *pro bono* law clinics inside the claims process could have profound positive effects on the speed and accuracy of veterans' claims processing.

For example, the Lewis B. Puller, Jr. Veterans Benefits Clinic at William and Mary Law School, and the associated Helping Military Veterans through Higher Education Consortium (HMOVHE) have committed in-depth assistance to veterans to acquire and compile needed supporting documentation and complete assessments resulting in the submission of thorough and complete claims. I believe that we can use the Puller Clinic's method and their dedication to acquire requisite documentation, coordinate medical evaluations, and submit comprehensive claim forms as a template for *pro bono* law school veterans clinics across the nation.

The efforts of these clinics can lead to claims that are filed in a more comprehensive manner when they are submitted at the beginning of the process. A formal partnership with the VA and relationships with regional offices that allow the clinics inside the claims process would allow the *pro bono* lawyers to research and acquire necessary documentation as claims are being

adjudicated, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of the claims process and preventing the lengthy appeal situation that many of our veterans face.

Currently, there are law schools in the following states that have created veterans law clinics: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, North Carolina, New York, Ohio, South Carolina, Texas, Virginia, Wisconsin, and West Virginia. Law schools in Colorado, Pennsylvania, and Oregon are exploring development of similar clinics. By officially partnering with these schools, the veterans of our nation could benefit from and enjoy reduced time in the claims process.

I ask that you consider creating a formal relationship that allows *pro bono* law school veterans clinics inside the VA claims process to improve services to veterans across our nation. The Puller Clinic and HVMHE can also serve as a Center of Excellence to help educate and train law schools nationwide to coordinate with the VA and support the veterans to whom we all owe a debt of gratitude. The unique services of these clinics have the potential to greatly increase the efficiency and accuracy of the VA claims process and ultimately benefit veterans.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Robert J. Wittman". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Robert J. Wittman
Member of Congress